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International Literacy Day Today

100pc literacy rate hard to achieve for Bangladesh

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The government is set to miss the Millennium Development Goal of hundred percent literacy of the population aged above 15 by this year.

Around 40 percent people of the age group are illiterate, according to the 2013 census of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

The government has already failed to keep its electoral pledge to eradicate illiteracy from the country by 2014.

Experts and educationists blame the failure on poor planning and lack of initiatives.

Against this backdrop, the country observes International Literacy Day today. This year's theme is Literacy and Sustainable Societies.

The ruling Awami League in its 2008 election manifesto promised to ensure cent percent literacy by 2014. After assuming office in 2009, it incorporated the target in the National Education Policy 2010 and the sixth five-year plan for development.

However, not much progress has been made towards the target. The government could not implement any major initiative yet.

Only last year, the Bureau of Non-formal Education (BNFE) took up Tk 452-crore Basic Literacy Project to give education to 45 lakh people between 15 and 45 years in 64 districts.

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The project is now at the preparatory stage, under which deputy commissioners of the districts will carry out field-level work through selective NGOs (non-government organisations), said Primary and Mass Education Minister Mostafizur Rahman.

Asked why the government has fallen short of the electoral promise, he said, "It is not possible to change everything overnight but we have put all-out efforts and continued trying to ensure cent percent literacy."

Since 1991 when democracy was restored in the country, successive governments implemented a number of projects spending more than Tk 2,000 crore in collaboration with development partners.

The literacy rate rose to 51 percent in nearly six years by 1997 from 35.3 percent but then the progress seemed to lose momentum.

In 1995, the government formed the Directorate of Non-Formal Education that implemented four projects before being transformed into BNFE in 2005.

All the projects had separate target groups and achieved their goals, said BNFE officials, adding that many people had received basic and skill-based education.

Still, around 40 percent people are illiterate.

Experts pointed out that lack of long-term and sustainable planning in non-formal education and constraints of resources for adult education programmes were behind the government's failure in reaching the goal.

The government should set a realistic timeframe and make a more focused move to achieve the target, they added.

"From the very beginning, our focus is on institutional education. Therefore, adult education gets less priority. And whatever initiatives the government took were solely project-based," said Rasheda K Choudhury, former primary education adviser to caretaker government.

The government's will to increase literacy rate has not been reflected in the policy, planning and investment, she said.

"We did not see investment in the people who were either left out or dropped out of formal education. If we analyse our budget since 2000, we would realise that the literacy was a forgotten agenda."

The executive director of Campaign for Popular Education, Rasheda, however, added that the literacy issue had been sidelined globally with the donor agencies paying little attention to it.

To achieve the target, the educationist said, "We have to acknowledge that a huge number of people are still left out of our institutional system and then we've to have a proper plan and strategies in place."

The programmes should be taken up considering socio-economic realities unlike those that are project-based.

There should be a social movement engaging communities and local governments against illiteracy, Rasheda said.

"There has to be a sustained effort," said Manzoor Ahmed, professor emeritus of Brac University, echoing her view.

The aim to wipe out illiteracy by 2014 was unrealistic, he said, adding that nationwide community learning centres should be set up, where the learning process would continue.